



September 1, 2020

Dear Christopher Andrews,

Thank you for submitting your webtext, “Cumulus Culminations: Learning to Read the Clouds” with your co-authors (Carolina Aşar, Ethan Gross, Kelsy Mascorro, Elizabeth Mock, Emille Moreno, Nicole Rothenay, Sydney Spangler, & Philly Vasquez) for consideration in the Praxis section of *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*.

We have completed a second-level, external peer-review, called a Tier 2 review at *Kairos*, which is conducted collaboratively with a group of editorial board members and, on occasion, additional external reviewers. The reviewers were quick to appreciate the work you’d done with your students, and they have some revision recommendations to make the piece stronger. Like all tiers of review at *Kairos*, this process is done semi-openly, so that the reviewers dialogue about your submission via an email thread over the course of several weeks. This dialogue produces a rich (and sometimes lengthy) conversation about a webtext that includes praise and suggestions for revision. In this editorial letter, I will summarize the conversation into key points we would like you to focus on to revise this webtext for re-review.


In the attached reviews, I have highlighted the areas that I am summarizing here as the key points we would like to see you and your co-authors revise. We fully recognize that conducting revisions with co-authors who are students can be challenging, but the reviewers have primarily targeted areas that are likely the sections you primarily worked on as lead author/instructor.

The reviewers had very positive things to say about this assignment and the way it might be taken up by readers in similar teaching positions in general Masters programs, as the third reviewer noted. They also “like[d] the collaborative nature of the execution of this assignment.” The first reviewer called it a “thoughtful assignment framing” that was “timely, relevant, and helpful.” The second reviewer thought it was a “useful model.” We are, thus, very eager to see a revision of this webtext as soon as you are able.

The reviewers also had some pertinent and helpful recommendations for areas that would benefit from a bit more unpacking. They wanted to read more about the context of the whole course and the student population, as well as a bit more unpacking of the theories (both useful and not-so-useful) of distant reading, particularly as it relates to better defining the jargon. “Word-watchers” and “threshold concepts” were pointed out as specific terms that needed better description and connection to the importance of clouds as an entry point for the field. Related, see the third reviewer’s note about “what’s not shown” in clouds and what general (not rhet/comp) masters students might actually be able to take away from a journals assignment like this during the course of a semester (or not). The second reviewer (and most that followed) requested more on “cloud-making as a writerly or compositional act. [I]t seemed at times like the goal was inventional and generative (i.e., to surface keywords for watching and following or for writing with) and at other like the goal was interpretive and analytical (i.e., to learn

about journal contents and recent scholarly conversations by applying distant reading).” Some of this work can be done by more fully delving into the scholarly content that the students read and bringing that work to light (per Reviewer 4’s comments) in your introduction to the assignment. Some of that work might also be done in terms of beefing up the Conclusion so that the impacts are broader—and a big part of this might be speaking more to the expectations of what the students’ learned and what their assignment outcomes show about the field, per Reviewer #3’s comments. Finally, there were one or two small navigational revisions the reviewers (see #5’s highlighted note in particular) would like to see.

You will notice in the attached reviews, which you can read in full, that some of the reviewers responded to a new set of expanded peer-review questions we are piloting at *Kairos*. (As Managing Editor, I know you are aware of these new questions and, indeed, participating in helping to write them. I just wanted to formalize that we used them for your text.) These questions aren’t meant to be answered formally by reviewers, unless they want to, but simply serve as a reminder of our publishing goals and mission: to publish excellent and inclusive scholarship in multimedia forms. For your reference, here is the list of questions we asked reviewers to consider when reading your webtext.

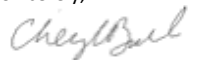
- Does the webtext add new ideas/concepts to the field? 
- Does the rhetoric, design, and code cohere in ways that forward the argument?
- Does the webtext have major holes (in form or content) that need to be fixed?
- If relevant, is the methodology clear and justified? If it uses experimental or nontraditional methods, is their use explained well through the rhetoric and/or design?
- Does the webtext incorporate literature that acknowledges the feminist and/or cultural rhetorical traditions relevant to the author’s argument? Does it include scholars of multiple identities (gender, race, ethnicity, disability, etc.), if known? Does it include research in multiple forms (open v. closed-access sources)?

As one of the first authors whose review has been guided by this new heuristic, your feedback on these questions would be welcome.

In conclusion, we are eager to see a revision of your collaboratively authored webtext, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have about the reviewers’ feedback. We also offer a Tier 3 mentoring process, should you desire, where we partner you with an editorial board or staff member who can offer perspective based on the reviews as you revise. If you are interested in this option, it lasts 12 weeks from the time we introduce you to your mentor, and in exchange, *Kairos* expects that you will resubmit to us first when you complete your revisions. Please let us know if you would like this assistance.

If you have any questions at any time, do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to receiving your resubmission in the coming months.

Sincerely,



Cheryl E. Ball, Editor
kairosrtp@gmail.com

Reviews

#1 DEREK MUELLER

I've read the manuscript and wanted to send a few notes about initial impressions--in part because the next few weeks are (eyes calendar...phew!) unusually hectic with the lead-up to the start of the new semester.

I read this as a piece of teacher research, which follows through on a commitment to student-centered, feminist pedagogy in its co-publishing with students in the class. The exigence for the article is classroom-based, and this confirms for me its appropriateness for the Praxis section of *Kairos*.

I don't know whether the piece adds *new* concepts to the field as much as it recirculates through careful application recently (re-)established interests in word watching, word clouds, and the pursuit of network sense through thin and distant methods. The article documents a pedagogical experiment, and the attempt reflects a **thoughtful assignment framing as well as mixed uptakes** upon reflection by the MA students in the class. It's flattering to see one's own work extended in this way, and so I was, as you might expect, very interested to see these ideas applied in the ways they were. I am not surprised by the mixed uptake. I think other teachers of disciplinary introductions/surveys or of digital rhetorics courses would find this work--and the range of reflections by students in the class, especially--to be **timely, relevant, and helpful**.

The emphasis on reading stood out to me and generated for me a **mild wish for a bit more acknowledgement of cloud-making as a writerly or compositional act**. Hermeneutics and heuristics, or interpretation and invention, need not heed strictly contrastive demarcation, as they overlap and inform one another. **But it seemed at times like the goal was inventional and generative (i.e., to surface keywords for watching and following or for writing with) and at other like the goal was interpretive and analytical (i.e., to learn about journal contents and recent scholarly conversations by applying distant reading)**. The turn to proairesis favors an inventive and heuristic emphasis, as I understand it from Collin's work, yet this doesn't hold especially consistently across the student reflections. And that's okay. I just wonder whether this particular thread warrants just a bit more development and fuller acknowledgement.

I was thinking, too, as I read, about the **emphasis that has been placed on threshold concepts as "structures of participation"** in work by Linda Adler-Kassner and Liz Wardle. Approached generously, word clouds rendered from journals could operate as provisional structures of participation, but they also seem to **need more acknowledgement of how graduate students choose to participate (and also change their minds about participating) in disciplinary knowledge-making, not only as readers in coursework, but also as word watchers whose own words can steer disciplinary interests**. I tried in Network Sense to cast this in terms of turn-making, suggesting there that by way of these methods graduate students might conceive of themselves as contributing to new threshold concepts. Of course, this doesn't mean everyone who studies in an MA program wants to do research with relevance to the discipline, much less become a turn-maker. In Sydney's reflection, the point about word watching being an early step and needing continuation and follow-through stood out for me for the way it emphasized development, qualifying that network sense takes time, and semesters are short. I don't consider this a major gap for the piece to address, but I thought **it might have been brought forward more conspicuously, that disciplinary inroads take longer than a semester**, whether that's at the undergrad, MA, or PhD level of study.

Again returning to the questions posed by Cheryl, yes, I think the methodology is justified and well explained. I also find evidence of building the piece from scholarly contributions based upon or directly informed by multiple, ranging identity standpoints and perspectives. I can be more specific about these, if that would be helpful.

I'll leave it at this for now and watch for follow-ups. I hope these few notes are generative for others, useful to the review process, and appropriate for this process.

#2 JOHNDAN JOHNSON-EILOLA

I'll apologize in advance for the brevity of this; like all of you, I'm trying to retrofit my fall classes for different modes of deliver (with the near-certainty that the modes of delivery are going to change about mid-September, as returning students bring in a second wave of Covid-19 to my region of way upstate New York, relatively isolated since mid-March). But I wanted to offer some thoughts before the deluge.

I agree with Derek's reading this as teacher-research rather than an original contribution to theory. I think the piece offers others a useful model for apply word clouds, distant reading, etc. to their own graduate students just entering the field. A lot of my criticisms below may be asking too much for a group of MA students—I don't mean that in a patronizing way; I only mean that I'm stating issues I see but I'm not sure we need to insist they fully address them.

The piece doesn't offer, I think, enough consideration about how to position word clouds against other types of visualizations or an examination of the relative weaknesses of word clouds as a form of data visualization compared to others (like a simple bar graph). I realize I may sound hypocritical given that the Selfe and Selfe work on word clouds the authors reference from 2012 was co-edited by me. I'll just say that the first Selfe was my diss director and a lot of my misgivings are in hindsight. I'd put this in the same category as Derek's comments about wanting more discussion about word clouds as a form of writing as well as a form of reading.

Some of the decisions that the students made about how to break up the journals into separate clouds needed more interrogation—some students worked by year, some by sub-year. These short terms are somewhat useful, but longer terms might also be enlightening.

Finally, the Conclusion seemed a little rushed: What about comparing the word clouds of each publication to the others? Different venues, we know, have different stances or viewpoints about what's important in the field. Can we ask them to spend a little time summarizing the specific stance of each journal compared to the others?

I'll try to contribute to the conversation as it starts to pick up speed, but I wanted to keep things moving while I had a little spare time.

#3 CHEN CHEN

Hi all!

I agree with Johndan and Derek that as a classroom research project, this piece fits well in the Praxis section. I also find the methodology clear and justified.

<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net>

I really like the collaborative nature of the execution of this assignment. It appears that students looked at each other's word clouds and performed perhaps a kind of peer review that was highly engaging and generative, especially when they could gain further insights or reexamine their own work and the values of the assignment by looking at others' word clouds and through class discussions. I'd say the assignment not only provided an opportunity for individual students to be inventive in terms of making sense of the discipline through distant reading and thin description methods, but collectively their exchanges were equally generative and inventive in a sense-making activity of disciplinary knowledge.

That being said, I think this piece can be most useful and helpful, as Derek suggested, to other teachers of similar introductory courses. Thus, I would like to see a bit more description of context for this assignment: programmatic structure and curriculum design, student population in terms of academic and professional interests (this was somewhat addressed), and the rest of the assignments in this course. I find it fascinating that even though some students resisted the usefulness of word clouds, they found perhaps unexpected connections and possibilities of using word clouds in their future professional endeavors (for example, Emille's reflection on using word clouds in hospital policy making). As someone who teaches in a similar programmatic context, this piece makes me think about how to reconcile our students' professional/academic development and expectations with what we perhaps traditionally think to be necessary in courses that "introduce students to the field." This may be something to be addressed as implications?

Sorta related to Derek and Johndan's point about talking more about word cloud-making as a compositional act, I wonder if this move could push students to consider even more how it's applicable to other contexts of meaning making and sense making, beyond "the survey of the field" type of activity.

As to the third question in the review heuristic: *Does it incorporate literature that acknowledges the feminist and/or cultural rhetorical traditions relevant to the author's argument? Does it include scholars of multiple identities (gender, race, disability, etc.), if known? Does it include research in multiple forms (open v. closed-access sources)?* As I was reading the clouds, it struck me that not only is what we see in these clouds important, but also what we do not see. Kelsy's readings of *Peitho* made me wonder how diverse these issues were; the prominence of the word "white" over "black" in the cloud of 20.2 seems to be telling something. From reading these publications, I wonder if students discussed issues of inclusivity in scholarly publications of the field. Certainly, several journals they studied, such as *Enculturation*, *Technoculture*, and *Peitho* all publish work on rhetoric and culture, but I wonder if students interrogated further if or why other journals are less so? Or if in all of these issues, they recognized any patterns in how minoritized scholars and their work are represented or marginalized?

I have one comment about design. On the page of all the clouds, I wonder if it would be better to present all five clouds for each journal horizontally for easier comparison and less scrolling?

#4 DAVID RIEDER

If it's going to be considered for the webtext section, I think the piece needs a stronger grounding in the scholarship that is cited and/or alluded to. As it stands, it seems more like a report on an assignment with some pretty basic conclusions/outcomes connected to it. The authors could do a better job of contributing to what has already been said by Brooke or Selfe and Selfe or Mueller, etc. I'd like to see this piece be a stronger contribution to one or more scholarly conversations in/around digital rhetoric, interventional strategies, distant reading in rhet/comp, etc.

Here are some requests and questions that I had:

- I wanted to see a bit more background on the theory/history of distant reading. Topics that came to mind are the following: Moretti's original uses of the approach and how its evolved in DH and beyond since then; whether the controversies surrounding the ethical uses of it (Moretti and #meToo) should be addressed; how distant reading differs from the close reading, and how the argument for a shift in the scale in literary work relates to our work in rhetorical and composition, and how Mueller has worked with this approach to DH/literary analysis in our field.

Commented [CEB1]: This is tempting, if it can be done briefly, but I'm not totally sure we need it exactly.

- I wanted more of a description/explanation of "novice-level word-watching." What does that really mean? Related to that, what is a 'word watcher'? Can that be related to other notions of the novice in our field? If the authors want to make a hook back into rhet/comp, can their novice be related to something in some meaningful to someone like the basic writer, etc?

- In the assignment section, the authors write, "and try to connect them to our reading earlier in the course—primarily Eyman's (2015) Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice, but also VanKooten's (2016) "Methodologies and methods for research in digital rhetoric", Hodgson and Barnett's (2016) "What is Rhetorical about Digital Rhetoric? Perspectives and Definitions of Digital Rhetoric," Zappan's (2005) "Digital rhetoric: Toward an integrated theory," and Brooke's (2009) Lingua Fracta, and a variety of other theoretical and practical texts." Can they develop some summaries of the key issues/approaches that the students studied and applied to the clouds from some or all of these texts, so we have a clearer sense of expectations, goals, etc?

- In the theory section, the authors write, "the instructor had high hopes for word clouds as a way for students to begin to think about the field of digital rhetoric and its threshold concepts." I would have liked to see them expand on that point. Why do they want them to begin thinking about the field in that way? What hopes did they have? What wasn't achieved, if hopes were not matched by student feedback on clouds they generated?


- In the conclusion, the authors write, "In the end, our experience with word clouds supports Mueller's notion that distant reading methods can be an engaging entry point for newcomers." This needs to be expanded. I assume Mueller offered a bit more than this generic statement in his work with word clouds. I'd recommend that the authors expand this point. Engaging how? To what ends?

- The authors might want to cite work like Stephen Ramsey's Reading Machines because he does a good job of explaining the value of distant reading strategies like these clouds. For Ramsey, distant reading is a way of defamiliarizing texts in order to generate new research questions. I say this because of statements like the following in the conclusion: "Clouds can reveal patterns we might not see otherwise, but can't reveal explanations for those patterns, and often leave us with many more questions than answers. Interpreting clouds and answering those questions is, as with any kind of research, much more difficult than making them in the first place."

Also, in terms of design, I was hoping that by clicking on the words in the clouds I would be taken somewhere, but the links lead anywhere. That seemed like an issue to addressed at the level of design.

#5 KAREN LUNSFORD

I agree with the comments made so far, especially with the idea that the theory section needs to be further articulated. As a reader, I found myself stumbling over the reference to threshold concepts. It occurs in a packed paragraph (starting "Similar to Brooke's...") that, if kept, should be unpacked. What, exactly, is the relationship between the word cloud assignment and threshold concepts? Threshold concepts are claims--full sentences such as "1.0 Writing is a social and rhetorical activity"--not individual words. I'm pretty sure the authors know this, but there's quite a bit of slippage in that section about how, precisely, "threshold concepts" relate to the "concepts" cited earlier in that section. And it's not clear how "threshold concepts" are being used in this graduate program (what, exactly, is meant by "patterns" of activity?) or in this particular graduate assignment (which "patterns" did the graduates exemplify in this assignment and their subsequent reflections? Moreover, is it implied that distant-reading the last 5 issues of a journal ought to make threshold concepts visible? If so, I'm not sure that assumption is warranted.).



A couple of thoughts, too, about the navigation --- I found myself lost in the clouds. Or rather, when I clicked on an individual student's page, it sometimes took me a few moments to remember that "classroom" was the page where I could return to all of the entries. I'm thinking that the menu header should be changed.

Also, on each student's "reflection" page -- maybe there could be a link to the next student's entry so that readers don't have to backtrack.